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*Published in:*  
Journal of Modern Italian Studies

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/1354571X.2017.1321932](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2017.1321932)

E-pub ahead of print: 21/06/2017

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

McNally, M. (2017). Socialism and democratic strategy in Italy's Biennio Rosso: Gramsci contra Treves. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 22(3), 314-337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2017.1321932>

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## Socialism and democratic strategy in Italy's *Biennio Rosso*: Gramsci *contra* Treves

Mark McNally

### Abstract

This article examines the divisions in Italian Socialism between Revolutionaries and Reformists against the backdrop of the *Biennio Rosso* (1919-20), taking the writings of Antonio Gramsci and Claudio Treves respectively as characteristic of the two traditions. The central focus is on their opposing accounts of how the Socialist movement should organize the masses to achieve its objectives – referred to here as its ‘democratic strategy.’ I demonstrate how the key strategic elements of Gramsci’s and Treves’s positions developed in a dialogue centered on the place violence, (il)legality, soviets, parliaments and compromise should play in effectively mobilizing the masses for Socialism. The article concludes by arguing that in retrospect Treves’s Reformism has been a more successful approach, and Gramsci himself conceded something to it in his prison writings. However, I also maintain that the popular character of Gramsci’s radical democratic strategy - first fashioned in the *Biennio Rosso* - can still contribute to debates on Socialism and Social Democracy today.

Questo articolo, utilizzando gli scritti di Antonio Gramsci e Claudio Treves, esamina rispettivamente le differenze fra le tradizioni del socialismo rivoluzionario e del socialismo riformista, durante il *Biennio Rosso* (1919-1920) in Italia. L’attenzione è sulle loro posizioni divergenti di come il movimento socialista dovrebbe organizzare le masse – qui descritto come ‘strategia democratica’ – per raggiungere i suoi obiettivi. In questo articolo dimostro come gli elementi strategici fondamentali di Gramsci e di Treves sono sviluppati in un dialogo centrato

sull'utilizzo della violenza, dell'(il)legalità, dei soviet, dei parlamenti e del compromesso per mobilitare le masse al fine di raggiungere il socialismo in modo efficace. L'articolo conclude sostenendo che, a posteriori, il riformismo di Treves è stato un approccio più efficace e che Gramsci nei suoi scritti dal carcere vi ci si avvicinò. Tuttavia, affermo anche che il carattere popolare della strategia democratica radicale di Gramsci – pensata in primis durante il *Biennio Rosso* - può ancora contribuire ai dibattiti sul socialismo e sulla socialdemocrazia oggi.

### **Keywords**

Antonio Gramsci, Claudio Treves, Socialism, democracy, political strategy, *Biennio Rosso*

Word Count: 8087

### **Introduction**

Almost one hundred years ago Italian Socialism entered into a series of ferocious internal conflicts in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution (1917) and the First World War (1914-18) that shaped its history throughout much of the twentieth century. Indeed, the momentous events of Italy's *Biennio Rosso* (1919-20) - 'Two Red Years' - in which Revolutionary Socialist ideas and industrial and social unrest swept across the country had a significant impact on the course of European politics more generally. Thus, the arrival of Bolshevism in Italy weakened Italy's fledgling parliamentary democracy irretrievably (the so-called 'crisis of the Liberal State') and paved the way for the rise of Fascism, but also, shaped the divisions in Italian politics thereafter

(Banin 2013; Maione 1975; Spriano 1975). In a European context, the *Biennio Rosso* stands out as one of the key battlegrounds and defining moments in the struggle between Reformist and Revolutionary Socialism which not only had reverberations across the continent at the time, but – as I will demonstrate below – continues to speak to debates in Socialist thought today as we approach its centenary.

For Italian Socialism, in particular, the importance of the *Biennio Rosso* can hardly be understated. By late 1920, it had effectively left the PSI (*Partito Socialista Italiano*) disastrously divided into Reformist, Communist and Maximalist factions. The Communists in fact left the Party in January 1921 to form the *Partito Comunista d'Italia* (PCI) in disgust at its lack of revolutionary principle; Filippo Turati's Reformist wing was forced out in October 1922 creating the *Partito Socialista Unitario* (PSU); leaving the PSI in the hands of Giacinto Serrati's dominant Maximalist faction (De Grand 1989, 31-45). Despite its retrospective idealization as a missed opportunity to accomplish Socialist revolution in Italy (Spriano 1975, 126-137), the ultimate effects of the *Biennio Rosso* were therefore the fragmentation and weakening of Italian Socialism which it arguably never recovered from.

This article sets out to make a contribution to our understanding of the *Biennio Rosso* and its impact on Italian and European Socialism, exploring the fierce conflict between Reformist and Communist wings of the PSI. It examines the work of two leading lights in the opposing camps – the Revolutionary Antonio Gramsci and the Reformist Claudio Treves – against the historical backdrop of the *Biennio Rosso*. The focus is primarily on their opposing visions of the relations Socialism was required to establish with the masses to achieve its goals of a radical

transformation of society – referred to here as their competing democratic strategies (on Gramsci's mass political strategy, see Fontana 1993; McNally 2015; Salvadori 2007).

The history of Gramsci's contribution to the Turin Factory Council Movement in the *Biennio Rosso* and his ideas on industrial democracy while editor of the *L'Ordine Nuovo* journal have of course been well-documented (Bellamy and Schecter 1993, 28-58; Clark 1977; Schecter 1991; Spriano 1965, 1971, 1975; Williams 1975). Indeed, there is now an extensive literature on the political and intellectual context of these writings which chart the development of Gramsci's ideas in relation to Serrati's Maximalism and Bordiga's dogmatic Communist creed (De Felice 1971; Cammett 1967, Part II); Sorel and the Anarcho-Syndicalist tradition (Levy 1999; Schecter 1990, 637-653; Spriano 1965, 56-62); and the American Daniel de Leon and the English Shop Steward Movement (Davidson 1974, 41-42; Spriano 1965, 69-73). Surprisingly, however, there is a relative lack of scholarship on the relationship of his early *L'Ordine Nuovo* writings with the Reformist Socialist tradition (see though, Levy 2001; Orsini 2012). My intention is therefore to redress this here by charting his development of a democratic strategy defined against Italian Reformism in the *Biennio Rosso*.

Similarly, the meagre literature on Claudio Treves to date provides little insight into his thought during this crucial period, or more importantly, how he employed the main Reformist organ – *Critica Sociale* - to develop an account of the proper relations Socialism must forge with the masses.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, our knowledge of Treves is mainly restricted to his own journalism and published works (1945, 1981, 1983, 1995, 2014) and two biographical studies (including selections of Treves's writings) by Antonio Casali (1985, 1989). This is somewhat surprising since Treves was not only among the founding members of the PSI, but also, had a colorful and extraordinary

career. Like Gramsci, he was imprisoned and exiled for his beliefs,<sup>2</sup> which he defended at the point of a sword in duel with Benito Mussolini in 1915 – then a Revolutionary Socialist - wounding the budding dictator's ear (Matteotti 1987).

This article, thus, sets out to make a contribution to debates on Treves as well as neglected aspects of Gramsci's thought, taking nonetheless as its primary concern the very contemporary issue of the relationship Socialist movements are required to establish with the masses to achieve success. In this spirit, it concludes with a more general reflection on the lessons and legacies of the *Biennio Rosso* for contemporary Socialism, arguing that while history would seem to have vindicated key elements of Treves's Reformist approach – which Gramsci himself appeared to partially recognize in his prison writings – the more popular character of Gramsci's democratic strategy can still contribute to debates on the dilemmas of Socialism and Social Democracy today. Such a discussion will, however, only make sense if we first capture the fundamental historical context of the *Biennio Rosso* and the contrasting visions of Gramsci and Treves on mass democratic politics that were forged against its backdrop.

### **The *Biennio Rosso* (1919-20)**

The battle between Reformist and Revolutionary Socialists in Italy which reached its height in the *Biennio Rosso* had arguably been raging since the founding of the PSI at Genoa in 1892 (Cortesi 1972). The presence of strong Anarchist and Syndicalist traditions on the Italian Left gave the conflict a unique character (Levy 1989, 1993, 2000). However, as elsewhere in Europe, the divisions were given particular impetus by the splits in the Second International occasioned by

the emergence of Eduard Bernstein's Revisionist Marxism in the 1890s (Arfe 1965, 83-97; Lindemann 1983, 147-158), and crucially, the outbreak of the First World War. The latter divided Socialists between dominant 'patriotic' parties supporting their national governments; 'neutrals' refusing to take sides; and 'Revolutionaries' who sought to use the War to foment domestic sedition (Sassoon 1996, 5-31). Despite some dissent from Mussolini among others, (Clark 2014, 220), the PSI stood among the neutrals with its famous 'neither support nor sabotage' policy (Galli 1980, 81-95).

It was however the outbreak of the Russian Revolution and the foundation of the Comintern (the Third International) in the spring of 1919 which brought to a head the divisions between Reformist and Revolutionary Socialists in Italy (Caretto 1974). At its inaugural Congress in 1919 it denounced the Reformists and 'Centrists' (identified with intermediary elements such as Karl Kautsky) as 'opportunists' bereft of revolutionary principle whose parties had become, under the stewardship of the Second International, 'subsidiary organs of the bourgeois state' (Trotsky 1956, 46). In the (in)famous Twenty-One Points of August 1920 the Comintern accordingly demanded of its affiliating parties 'a complete and absolute break with Reformism and with the policy of the Centre' and the expulsion of 'notorious opportunists' such as Turati (Lenin 1956, 170).

Unsurprisingly, the early Comintern's dogmatic revolutionary creed and commitment to purge Reformist and Centrist factions from the Socialist movement created an explosive situation in Italy given the immense post-war social unrest and the presence of all tendencies within Italian Socialism (Caretto 1974, 95-163). While the Maximalist leadership of the PSI under Serrati

appeared at first to champion its causes, in practice it did little to realize them (Davidson 1977, 131-132; Sabbatucci 1996, 49-50) and shared more with Centrists elsewhere in Europe. It was rather the emerging Revolutionary Socialist wing of the PSI who were firmest in their demands for action in line with Moscow. A group of these future PCI members – including Antonio Gramsci, Palmiro Togliatti and Angelo Tasca – had already founded the *L'Ordine Nuovo* journal in Turin in May 1919 to pursue radical Socialist objectives in the field of proletarian culture and education. The journal was, however, only a month in publication when it embarked on the much more ambitious programme of translating the soviet experience of the Bolsheviks to Italy by proposing the 'internal commissions' (already operating in Torinese factories as a form of negotiated worker involvement) be transformed into the nucleus of a system of Italian self-governing soviets or workers' councils (Gramsci 1977I, 66-67).<sup>3</sup> As the mass social unrest intensified and the militancy of Turin's metallurgical workers in particular grew, it was not long before councils were sprouting up all over Italy's 'Petrograd' and beyond, replacing the CGL as the dominant force in the workplace (Williams 1975, 85).

Throughout 1918-19 working class unrest had in fact been increasing steadily in Italy (Clark 1977, 13-35). The impact of the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the Comintern dominated the PSI's annual Congress at Bologna in October 1919 where the battle between Reformists and Revolutionaries raged openly. While the Congress fell short of expelling the minority Reformist faction (including Treves and Turati) in line with Amadeo Bordiga's inflexible Communist platform (Cammatt 1967, 68-69), it nonetheless endorsed by a large majority a radical programme by Serrati's Maximalist leadership to join the Comintern and pursue its aim of 'proletarian



dictatorship' (De Grand 1989, 37). With this overtly revolutionary agenda the PSI swept to victory in Italy's first election under full male suffrage in November 1919, winning an additional 100 seats and emerging as the largest party in parliament (Duggan 2008, 422). The country thus seemed on the brink of Socialist revolution as it faced into 1920.

Indeed, radicals like Gramsci would look back on 1920 as a missed opportunity to establish a Socialist state in Italy. They attributed its failure to the lack of support by Reformists and Maximalists in the Party and trade unions who not only failed to mobilize the workers behind the revolutionary surge at its height in April 1920 when Piedmont was virtually closed down in a general strike, but did their utmost to subdue the revolutionary potential of the situation (Gramsci 1977g, 319-320). In September, when workers mounted a second wave of strikes in which they took control of the factories and continued production for a time alone, it was therefore the Party and CGL who willingly stepped in to end the unrest by brokering an 'economic' compromise between industrialists, government and workers (Clark 1977, 168-180).

Gramsci of course sought to direct the crisis of the *Biennio Rosso* towards a revolutionary denouement (Martin 1998, 19-29). Treves, by contrast, played a significant part in quelling its revolutionary élan and re-directing the focus of Italian Socialism away from the militant councils and back to the moderate Reformist bastions of parliament and trade unions. As Spriano has shown, he not only facilitated the negotiations between the unions and government to resolve the dispute 'peacefully and legally,' but even suggested the authorities should use force against striking workers to re-occupy the factories if necessary (1975, 176-177). Underlying these

conflicting approaches were of course fundamental divergences on how Socialism should harness the power of the masses to meet its objectives which the popular unrest of the *Biennio Rosso* had placed firmly on the agenda of Italian and European politics. It is to these key strategic debates which I now turn.

### **Legality, violence and responsibility in mass politics**

As elsewhere in Western Europe in the post-First World War context, there was perhaps no more fundamental divergence between Italian Reformist and Revolutionary Socialists over the correct democratic strategy to pursue Socialism than that which revolved around the promotion and use of mass illegality and violence aimed at the overthrow of the Capitalist state. In Italy, Reformists tended to share with Bernstein and Kautsky a preference for ‘peaceful’ and ‘legal’ means led by *responsible* elites that eschewed mass insurgency and the ‘dictatorial’ methods of the Bolsheviks (Di Scala 1996, 19; Miller 1975, 106). There has been a tendency to examine this debate between Reformists and Revolutionaries in terms of the ‘orthodoxy’ of violence and dictatorship in Marxist theory (Andreucci 1986; Caretti 1974; Santarelli 1964). However, what has arguably been neglected is the manner in which both sides evaluated the benefits and dangers of illegal and violent action in terms of its potential to harness mass support and advance the cause of Socialism in a Western European state like Italy.

The Reformist defense of pursuing a legal strategy was clearly shaped by the belief that legality and non-violence were already part of mass working-class culture in the West, and it thus shared

much with a wider Pacifist strain in Second International Marxism exemplified by Kautsky (2012, 4-41). This owed much of course to the PSI's birth as an anti-insurrectionist movement since at the party's inception in the Sala Sivori in Genoa in 1892, the Socialists led by Turati had famously split from the Anarchists when the latter attempted to block a strategy of peaceful constitutional politics (Di Scala 1980, 19-22). This Reformist-Pacifist tendency dominated the Party until the eve of the *Biennio Rosso* and it was reflected in the PSI's refusal to comply with Giolitti's colonial War in Libya (1911-12),<sup>4</sup> and more significantly, in its neutral position on the First World War. When the party leadership appeared to turn to an intransigent strategy of mass violence and dictatorship in response to the popular unrest unleashed by the post-war economic catastrophe and the rousing example of the Russian Revolution, the Reformists thus condemned it as the height of irresponsibility and a betrayal of the true tradition of Italian Socialism established at Genoa. Indeed, in the run-up to the Bologna Congress in October 1919, Treves and *Critica Sociale* were quick to draw the parallels with the past, claiming that 'Maximalism' was simply a 'literal and flagrant reproduction...of the pre-Socialist Anarchism of Sala Sivori, against which, the Socialist Party emerged and affirmed itself in Italy – thirty years ago!' The journal promised to oppose this rage for 'armed insurrection' with the 'Socialism of Genoa,' and to defend it 'tooth and nail, to the grave and beyond' ("La Critica Sociale" 1919b, 221-222).<sup>5</sup>

A key aspect of this defense was Treves's frequent accusations that 'intransigents' were exploiting a transitory 'cult of violence' among sections of the masses who had been brutalized in war and were thus particularly susceptible to the myth of the miraculous effect of popular violence in the Russian Revolution. 'Maximalism,' he argued, in its naïve belief in the Bolshevik's

audacious and triumphant clash with the Capitalist state [*un cozzo*], 'is *spiritually, voluntarist*...appeals to the [base] *instincts* of the masses, and has a blind faith in *violence* and *miracles*' (Treves 1920g, 243). Such criticism was however mainly reserved for dedicated Revolutionary elements such as Gramsci. For from the outset, the Reformists were unconvinced by Serrati's commitment to mass insurrection. The leadership was thus more often accused of conducting 'the most shameless bluff ever attempted' in talking up the rhetoric of violent revolution and 'imitating Russia' ("La Critica Sociale" 1919b, 222). In the aftermath of the April defeat Treves accordingly excoriated the Maximalists' Bologna Programme which had exalted 'uprising' (*sommossa*) while party leaders stood aloof from the consequences, refusing to command a struggle they initiated in which the masses lost their lives and livelihoods (1920c, 193).

Nonetheless, for Treves and *Critica Sociale*, whether the advocacy of mass violence and illegality was genuine or not, it was wholly irresponsible since it threatened to unleash a wave of reaction that would damage the cause of Italian Socialism and the gains it had already achieved. 'The promise to do "as in Russia"' Treves therefore argued, '...does not hold, as Italy is not...Russia' and an Italian revolution would quickly be suppressed by international Capitalism and the forces of the Entente (1919a, 271). In September 1919 he was already warning that though the post-war Italian state 'is little prepared for a return to production, it is still immeasurably strong enough to return to reaction' (Treves 1919d, 240). Turati developed this argument further at Bologna in October, spelling out clearly the potential consequences of the Party's rhetoric of insurrection:

Who among you takes seriously this armed revolution which so many talk endlessly about? ...This is a monstrous scam, a farce which for others could descend into tragedy: the preparation of war tribunals; ferocious reaction; the ruination of the movement for half a century... (1920a, 268).<sup>6</sup>

Such rebukes by Turati were of course greeted with howls of disapproval and endless heckling at Bologna, but Gramsci and the *L'Ordine Nuovo* were acutely aware that they required a serious and convincing response.

Gramsci's defense of mass illegal and violent methods in fact followed for the most part many of the familiar themes of Leninism and the Comintern. Imperialist Capitalism, he thus argued, was exhausted and the War had finally brought 'the catastrophe of the Capitalist world' predicted by Marx. Only Socialism and the working class could rescue Western civilization and Italy from 'barbarism' and 'economic ruin' (Gramsci 1977e, 89). But to set it on solid foundations and secure its economic development Socialists had to step up to the mark and take revolutionary responsibility for mobilizing the popular military overthrow of Capitalism. This, he stated plainly, necessitated mass violence and the establishment of 'a dictatorship' with a 'markedly military character' (Gramsci 1994c, 105). Its primary tasks were 'the expulsion of the Capitalists from the factory' (Gramsci 1919c, 37) and 'the systematic suppression of private property, and the bourgeois class in all its forms of domination: parliaments, newspapers, political parties, banks, professional armies...' (Gramsci 1919b, 88). In line with this position, *L'Ordine Nuovo* initially welcomed the party's Bologna Programme and particularly its candid statement that 'the proletariat will need to have recourse to violence to defend itself against bourgeois violence, for the conquest of power and for the consolidation of revolutionary achievements' which it warned

would demand 'spiritual and technical preparation' among the masses ('Il nuovo programma del Partito' 1919, 160).

The *L'Ordine Nuovo* group under Gramsci's editorship in fact gave special prominence to this issue of mass preparation and action, modeling themselves on their idealized version of popular Bolshevism that involved 'bold thinking and revolutionary action' and spurned the tame and inert approach of Reformist 'has-beens' (Gramsci 1994b, 142-145). From early on, the journal thus combined their Revolutionary Socialist ideology with reports of their practical organizational work among the Torinese working masses that notably included a school of revolutionary propaganda (Clark 1977, 72-73). Indeed, as a mark of their ultimate insurrectionary ambitions the journal made a point of publishing regular articles on organizing a Socialist army which it argued was crucial for proletarian victory (Gramsci 1994c, 105).

By early 1920, however, Gramsci was already complaining that despite the propitious conditions the leadership had made no move to prepare and organize the masses for the conquest of power. In contrast to Reformist charges of a reckless and disingenuous commitment to revolution, Gramsci and the Turin Socialists complained of its lack of revolutionary responsibility to the masses and its failure to make good on its commitments at Bologna. In January 1920 the radical Turin section of the PSI published a programme of action penned by Gramsci in *L'Ordine Nuovo* that promised to lead and spur the Party into action. It set out plans to proceed to the arming of workers, willingly taking 'responsibility for pushing the Socialist Party to promote the establishment of Workers' and Peasants' Councils all over Italy.' These, in turn, it argued would 'begin the task of building the higher institutions (the political Soviets) in which the dictatorship of the proletariat will be embodied' (Gramsci 1977a, 159). This initial confidence, however, soon

turned to disillusionment and anger after the April defeat and the part the leadership's inaction had played in it. From then onwards Gramsci began to progressively distance himself from the Socialist Party, as he turned his attention to the creation of a Communist party that could be trusted to prepare and lead a popular revolutionary dictatorship in Italy (Clark 1977, 174).

But the onslaught on Treves and Turati nevertheless continued. The Reformists' duplicity and hypocrisy in condemning 'undemocratic' belligerent Communists while ignoring and excusing the 'bourgeois dictatorship' – illustrated in its suppression of workers in 1920 – was particularly prevalent (Gramsci 1977c, 128). Gramsci thus mocked Turati's attempts to contrast Italy's parliamentary democracy to the soviet as a distinction between 'civilization and the barbarian hordes,' maintaining that the Italian State was a 'ruthless dictatorship of the propertied classes' that 'regarded the working people as ...an inferior race, to be governed ...like an African colony' (1994b, 142-143). He poured scorn too on Reformist claims that Communists were proposing slaying Capitalism through a simple and swift 'revolt.' 'The revolution,' he argued, 'is not a thaumaturgical act, but a dialectical process of historical development' (Gramsci 1977e, 92) that was epochal and required years of popular struggle that inevitably would entail defeats and setbacks. Although it was not assured, he maintained that victory was possible if the Party actually took seriously its responsibility to organize the revolution among the masses (Salvadori 2007, 55-56).

### **The institutional debate and the masses: Parliament versus soviet**

The character and location of this mass organizational work was of course a major bone of contention that turned on the vital strategic consideration as to which institution was best suited to *lead* the people towards Socialism in post-war Italy: parliament (and the parliamentary Socialist Party) or soviet. Treves and the Reformists at *Critica Sociale* argued that the potential of parliamentary democracy in Italy had barely been tested and the advent of full male suffrage in 1919 opened up the possibility of pursuing a programme of radical Socialist reform on the back of increasing parliamentary majorities. The Reformists thus defended an electoral strategy conducted primarily by parliamentary elites with the Party and trade unions playing a central role in periodic mobilizations of the newly enfranchised masses to obtain decisive electoral victories. Even before the Socialist success in the November 1919 election, at the Bologna Congress Turati had complained of the Party's failure to exploit 'an essentially Reformist period,' spelling out his case in stark numerical terms:

Out of 22 or 23 million future voters, they [the bourgeoisie] make up 2 to 3 million.

Eight to nine tenths of voters are authentically proletarian; that is, industrial workers, rural workers, sea workers, small-scale office employees...This is the enormous majority that universal suffrage provides. ...Universal suffrage puts in your hands the conquest of the state and, in fact, all of the conquests that you wish to achieve by insurrection (1920a, 265).

When the November victory went some way in confirming the potential of an electoral strategy it was greeted in a *Critica Sociale* editorial as '...a revolution! Legal, conspicuously legal; Pacifist; conspicuously Pacifist – but a revolution all the same' ("La Critica Sociale" 1919a, 301). In fact,



thereafter Treves and *Critica Sociale* began to agitate for the PSI deputies to ‘take power’ through the institutions of parliamentary democracy (Treves 1920a, 17-18).

The Reformists, moreover, contrasted the good sense of this strategy with the Party’s apparent revolutionary commitment to mobilize the masses in what Treves described as ‘a great frontal attack all across the frontier of the state’ (1920e, 150-151). This approach, he argued, ensured the paralysis of Socialist Reformism in parliament where the PSI remained ‘in the Chamber like a stranger making some noise every now and again to mark his presence and importance, inconveniencing all others a little, but taking no part in the real decision-making’ (Treves 1920e, 151). Indeed, the Party was accused of rejoicing in its inaction which led to regressive authoritarian legislation that it deluded itself would radicalize and spur the masses into revolutionary action since ‘the worse it is, the better it gets [*tanto peggio, tanto meglio*], the more reaction there is, the brighter the revolutionary dawn’ (Treves 1920h, 98). On the other hand, the Reformists also pointed at times to the hypocrisy of the PSI’s ‘revolutionary’ Maximalist deputies who expounded the Bolshevik rhetoric of corrupt ‘bourgeois democracy’ and relentless class conflict, while periodically making common cause with Reformist and Liberal deputies to vote for broadly progressive legislation (Treves 1920h, 98; see too Mondolfo 1920, 25-26).

Finally, Treves mounted a two-pronged and not entirely consistent attack on the idea that the soviet should replace parliament as the institution uniquely equipped to lead the Italian masses towards Socialism. Revolutionaries like Gramsci, he argued, simply refused to recognize that Italy and the Second International states were ‘in the already rich West [*nel già ricco Occidentale*],’ whereas Russia and the Third International were ‘in the East [*in Oriente*],’ (Treves 1919c, 97). Consequently, their ‘*soviettismo*’ was merely a case of ‘attempting to transplant a revolutionary

institution alien to our climate and soil' (Treves 1920f, 130). Despite the revolutionary fervor of post-war Italy, Treves argued, that in the long-term its authoritarian character would be emphatically rejected by the Italian working masses, since they had long been organized in a free, open and democratic Socialist organization based on party, trade unions and cooperatives. As the PSI drew closer to the Comintern in late 1920 Treves returned again and again to this theme of the necessity for distinct strategies in the authoritarian East and democratic West insisting in October:

The East is not the West. The methods which are attuned to where there is no tradition, liberty or self-criticism, cannot be adapted to places where the proletariat has a cultivated Marxism...and for many many years has been trained to...express in a more democratic manner their own will in the great assemblies of their political and economic organizations (1920b, 306).

While this was a dominant theme of Treves's rhetoric, it is important to note too that outright rejection of the soviet was sometimes off-set by a somewhat more conciliatory position. Drawing heavily on the traditions of German Social Democracy and Guild Socialism in Britain (see, Cole 1919, 203-204; Tosatti 1919, 134-136), Treves occasionally endorsed the idea that there could be a place for the soviet in Italian Socialism, though one which emphatically subordinated it to the parliamentary party and trade unions (1919a, 270-271). He therefore suggested that soviets could fulfill a democratic and technical role on the shop-floor of the emerging Socialist economy:

We believe and hope for yet the conquest of the interior of the State: *firstly*, with the direct pressure of the proletariat on the orders of production, with its training

to employ the instruments of control in the factory – internal commissions or factory councils which temper the despotic right of the entrepreneur and affirm, temporarily, constitutional right in the factory. *Secondly*, with the acquisition, in all useful manners, of political and parliamentary power, which should put in the hands of the proletariat the courts, the prefectures, the military barracks in a manner that directs them opportunely and victoriously against the inevitable counter-revolution (Treves 1920f, 130).

Indeed, Treves contrasted this ‘integral’ Socialist strategy that ‘demands and equally profits from trade union action, cooperative action, local government action, cultural action and was all assisted, defended and valued by parliamentary action’ with the narrow ‘*soviettismo*’ and quasi-Syndicalism of Gramsci. In sum, for Treves, Sovietists like Gramsci overlooked the fact that the conquest of power in the factory would be a short-lived disastrous affair without the wider apparatus of a socialized integral state led from parliament to provide it with civil and military protection (1919a, 270-272; see too, Baldesi 1920, 134-136).

Gramsci’s response to such criticism and the Reformist defense of parliamentary democracy was to claim that ‘the Parliament of deputies elected by universal suffrage (i.e by the exploiters and the exploited)’ was not ‘democracy’ at all but ‘the mask of bourgeois dictatorship’ (1977c, 127). He maintained in particular that the Reformists’ positivist and primitive mindset left them incapable of conceiving of democracy as an historical process of mass empowerment. Consequently, Turati’s scientific Socialism determined that ‘democracy’ was *objectively* ‘parliamentary democracy’ and he therefore could not see beyond ‘the perpetuity and fundamental perfection of the institutions of the democratic State’ (Gramsci 1977d, 76).

In response to Reformist charges of advocating the authoritarian anti-democratic methods of the East that abolished all rights to legal opposition, Gramsci - like Lenin - insisted in unapologetic terms that the exploiters of labor forfeited their rights to democracy. *L'Ordine Nuovo* he therefore proclaimed was 'antidemocratic as regards its conception of the Socialist state, which must be a class state, committed to a revolt that would suppress forcefully private property and the exploiting classes.' But, he quickly added, they were 'profoundly democratic in their conception of the internal relations between the institutions and individuals in the workers' and Socialist movement' (Gramsci 1919a, 47). Democracy and self-government were therefore to be reconceived not only as an ongoing historical project, but one that was provided exclusively to workers and their representatives.

For Gramsci, moreover, parliament and the parliamentary Socialist party, and indeed the trade unions, were incapable of leading the Italian people to Socialism since they were highly elitist and bureaucratic institutions that excluded the mass of workers from administrative and decision-making functions (Spriano 1965, 61-63). They thus lacked the confidence of the masses that was required for revolutionary action. In fact, to his lights, the Party in parliament and its trade union allies were an integral part of the Capitalist economic and political system. They collaborated and bartered with the bourgeoisie to preserve the existing order of mass exploitation in return for minor concessions in the workplace or irrelevant paltry reforms in parliament (Gramsci 1977i, 99; 1919b) - 'parliamentary "cretinism"' as Gramsci described it in a phrase borrowed from Marx (1977k, 148).

All of these shortcomings of the Reformists' parliamentary strategy could, Gramsci believed, be overcome by placing the workers' council at the head of the proletarian struggle. The reasons for

according to the soviet this vital role were transparent for Gramsci. Firstly, the council was a truly revolutionary and radical democratic institution since its purpose was not to negotiate better living and working conditions within the bourgeois democratic system, but to implement a fundamental rupture with the present by preparing 'the masses to become accustomed to self-government both in the industrial and political fields' (Gramsci 1977e, 90). This idea of the soviet as the kernel of a developing self-governing producers' republic thus contrasted sharply with Reformist claims that it was an authoritarian institution suitable only to the backward East. Indeed, Gramsci countered, 'Historical conditions in Italy were not and are not very different from those in Russia' (1977j, 85). Secondly, Gramsci insisted that it was the *mass* proletarian character of the soviets or councils - including the whole workforce of unionized and non-unionized urban and rural workers - which gave them the potential to mount a much more effective challenge to the Capitalist system than Socialist parliamentary elites who kept their mass reserves subordinated and passive with the assistance of trade union 'leaders' and bureaucrats. Responding to Reformist charges of Syndicalism Gramsci thus maintained:

The Syndicalist tendency of *L'Ordine Nuovo* is a myth. We simply are so mistaken as to believe that the Communist revolution can only be actuated by the masses and neither a party secretary nor a president of the republic can bring it about by decree. It seems to me that this was the opinion of Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and it is the opinion of Lenin - all of whom for Treves and Turati are anarcho-Syndicalists (1920a, 129).

Finally, Gramsci was adamantly opposed to 'integralist' attempts by Reformists to subordinate the developing soviets to the wider parliamentary and trade union apparatus. 'The Party,' he insisted, must:

...resist any attempt on the part of the Reformists and opportunists to turn control into a function of the bourgeois State and make the Factory Councils into organs of industrial collaboration ...with the bourgeois State bureaucracy and with Parliament. Control must be exercised by purely proletarian organs, and the working class must make it the vehicle for their mass revolutionary action (Gramsci 1977a, 159).

The integral Socialism of the Reformists that privileged the network of elites across parliamentary party, trade unions and cooperatives to lead a largely passive mass was thus anathema to Gramsci who placed significant faith in the capacity of the workers themselves to organize and bring about Socialism in the councils. He therefore advocated a much more radical and popular democratic strategy that conceived democracy as an historical process of genuine mass empowerment and self-governance. In this alternative vision of a socialist democracy the soviets were charged not only with organizing a revolution of the masses, but also administering and self-governing the Socialist state and economy in its aftermath.

### **The masses, strategic compromise and class confrontation**

To achieve this Socialist society Gramsci was convinced too that the working-class militancy that flared up in the revolutionary epoch of the *Biennio Rosso* must be forged into an enduring ideology of class confrontation. This position was of course defined against the Reformist and

Second International tendency to employ a strategy of elite-based compromises to pursue piecemeal reforms. The debate here was bound up with two conflicting theoretical views of the historical process of transition from Capitalism to Socialism. For Reformists like Treves and Turati, entrenched in a positivist scientific Socialist tradition, this process was characterized by near natural laws that guaranteed the expansion of the productive forces under monopoly Capitalism towards its political exhaustion and an increasingly planned Socialist economy. The Party elite in this schema was required to play a key pedagogical role in the long struggle to educate the masses for Socialism to complement the already determined evolution of the economy (Di Scala 1980, 58; Miller 1975, 107-108). This economistic conception of the historical process not only perceived the development of Socialism as driven by the economic base, but maintained that mass working-class culture lagged woefully behind economic development and a long transition period was therefore required to educate the workers. In these conditions, working-class leaders were inevitably required to make political compromises and cooperate with other progressive elites prepared to assist the development of Socialism.

Italian Reformists thus extolled the virtues of 'evolutionary Socialism' (Treves 1919b, 205-207; Turati 1919, 289-290) and Turati in his June 1920 '*Rifare L'Italia*' speech insisted that the post-war revolutionary period would be a long and complicated era of *gradual* progress towards Socialism (1920b, 196). It was, moreover, for the Reformists an era pregnant not only with opportunity to extend the rights and power of the workers, but also, with dangers of regressive reaction. A skillful and mainly parliamentary politics of strategic compromise was required to avert this. It would however take a very different shape than it had done in the past when Reformists had provided support to the Zanardelli and Giolitti Liberal governments (1901-11) as

*subordinate partners* in return for concessionary reforms and to avoid a return to the anti-Socialist reaction of the 1890s (De Grand 1996, 23-37). In the post-war revolutionary context Treves and Turati advocated a 'radical Reformism' that placed Socialist forces firmly in a situation of ascendancy in this new order of elite strategic compromise.

Treves's famous '*espiiazione*' speech in parliament in March 1920 stands out as one of the most important statements of this Reformist position. Addressing himself directly to the Liberals in the Italian Parliament, he proclaimed, in the era of Capitalist decline 'you can no longer impose your order on us and we cannot yet impose ours on you.' The proletariat, he thus argued, is compelled to rely on bourgeois cooperation in such circumstances, but this could 'only be the collaboration of the two sides of a scale in which one is falling and the other rising' (Treves 1920d, 1634). The bourgeoisie, moreover, could expect no swift deliverance from this period of subordinate collaboration which he conceived as a necessary atonement for the sins of Capitalism:

Revolution is an age, not a day. ...of course, you would like it to be over and done with. ...But it is not in our power to cut short the forward movement of God's plan. That is terribly long and painful. Though long and painful, it is also necessary. ...This is the inexorable corollary of the crime. Yes, gentlemen, this is the expiation (Treves 1920d, 1641).<sup>7</sup>

This theme of a system of strategic compromises with the progressive bourgeoisie on the basis of proletarian ascendancy was elaborated further in other famous statements of Reformism of the period, and was consistent with their attempts to dampen the revolutionary ardor of the *Biennio Rosso* and the dangers of reaction it engendered. In an article entitled '*Andare al Potere*'



in May 1920, Francesco Ciccotti thus pictured the revolution in Italy as one in which 'the Socialist proletariat will arrive at its first landmark through a gradual acquisition of political and economic power...by way of a gangplank' taking with them 'the last exemplary politicians of the bourgeoisie' (1920, 131). In a similar vein, Turati's '*Rifare L'Italia*' speech in June picked up on Treves's account of the expiation calling on the bourgeoisie to render the transition period that was manifestly underway less bloody by 'ceding power' and offering its own 'collaboration' to the emerging Socialist regime. Indeed, he recognized the inability of the proletariat to make an immediate transition to Socialism in the economy, maintaining that the Socialists could only take political and economic power through cooperation and compromise 'with bourgeois forces, bourgeois elements, technicians and experts who are willing to serve loyally the proletariat and Socialism' (Turati 1920b, 196).

Gramsci and the *L'Ordine Nuovo*, by contrast, derided this Reformist preference for strategic compromise with the bourgeoisie, opting instead for relentless class confrontation and a more direct Bolshevik-style route to Socialism. Writing in May 1918 Gramsci had already maintained the PSI 'cannot collaborate with any organized bourgeois parliamentary groupings without doing mischief' and turning itself into 'a ghastly hybrid ...devoid of will or political aims.' 'The Socialist Party,' he maintained, must pursue 'the method of the fiercest intransigence' (Gramsci 1994a, 67). As noted earlier, this commitment to an unyielding class struggle was rationalized by a stagist and *dialectical* account of history that assumed the masses were now ready for the first stage of Socialism. The defensive and compromising politics of the PSI in both its parliamentary and trade union forms, he argued, was understandable and even necessary in a pre-revolutionary era in which the proletariat was shaped by 'external influences...dependent upon Capitalist

competition' and the requirement to build up its support base in conditions of legality. However, the post-war era was a revolutionary epoch which 'turned the strategic conditions of the class struggle upside down.' It demanded that the proletariat become an autonomous and resolute revolutionary movement developing itself internally as the bearer of a new state, economy and civilization. Gramsci thus maintained, 'the Socialists forgot that their role had to be essentially one of criticism, of antithesis. Instead of mastering reality, they allowed themselves to be absorbed by it.' Indeed, this was the explanation for all 'the deviations, the hesitations, the compromises that characterized the whole of the proletarian movement's existence prior to the current period, and which have now culminated in the bankruptcy of the Second International' (Gramsci 1977d, 73-78).

While Gramsci's intransigence did not extend to Bordiga's dogmatic electoral and parliamentary abstentionism (Cammett 1967, 70), *L'Ordine Nuovo* gave special prominence to the inflexible positions then dominant among the Russian leaders of the Comintern. In an article entitled 'Parliamentarism and Sovietism' Bukharin thus emphasized that 'the fundamental difference between the parliamentary regime and the soviet system [is] ...the soviet denies all political rights to the non-productive classes' (1919, 146). This inflexible strategy was also to be adopted to Reformists, who were as Lenin expounded in the pages of *L'Ordine Nuovo* 'petty-bourgeois democrats who abhor the class struggle and dream of how it will be possible to succeed in avoiding that struggle ...to "make arrangements," to conciliate, and smooth over the edges' (1920, 20).

As the struggle within the Socialist Party intensified throughout 1920 and the anger grew among Revolutionaries at the inaction and collaboration of Reformists and Centrists with the demise of the councils' mass revolutionary potential, Gramsci followed this Leninist line unfailingly characterizing the Reformists as 'social traitors' (1920b, 119). Treves was singled out for particular criticism for a lack of faith in the proletarian masses, and his expiation speech identified as an exemplary instance of 'petty-bourgeois' and collaborationist ideology that endorsed a 'theory that was counter-revolutionary and defeatist of proletarian aspirations' (Gramsci 1977h, 194). Gramsci indeed eschewed any thought of compromise with Reformists who he deemed 'an infiltration on the part of the ideological agents of capital' (1977b, 173). Reformist calls for 'Socialist unity' were thus greeted with the argument that *L'Ordine Nuovo* was not interested in agreements between political cliques, but in building unity with the masses through the councils. This meant above all an end to the elitist organization and culture of Italian Reformism in both its political and economic manifestations and an empowering of the proletarian masses (Gramsci 1977b, 176-178).

Indeed, the only compromises that appeared palatable to Gramsci in his *Biennio Rosso* phase were those made with the 'poor peasants' or 'rural proletariat' who along with the urban workers were 'the two driving forces of the proletarian revolution' (1977j, 86). Compromise here was however *within the proletariat* and based on peasant subordination to the urban working-class who were 'the ordering element' in this relationship. The alliance with the poor peasantry was defended moreover in terms of the need to enlist their mass support to overthrow the bourgeois state and empower them to seize 'collective control over production in the countryside as well'

(Gramsci 1977f, 139-140). Gramsci was thus particularly scathing of Reformist efforts to enlist and subordinate the landless peasantry by petty parliamentary reforms such as the promise to redistribute 'uncultivated or poorly cultivated lands' (1977k, 147). For strategic reasons, however, and in line with the Bolshevik model, they would 'leave intermediate forms of private land ownership (small holdings) in existence' (Gramsci 1977f, 140). This grudging concession to the rural petty-bourgeoisie that conspicuously eschewed any idea of an alliance was however as far as the Gramsci of the *L'Ordine Nuovo* was prepared to go. Indeed, he claimed, 'the petty and middle bourgeoisie' were 'the worst, vilest, most useless and most parasitical section' and the proletariat had to prepare itself to confront this 'plague of putrid and voracious locusts' head-on and if necessary 'To drive them out of society...with steel and fire' (Gramsci 1977f, 135).

### **Conclusion: The *Biennio Rosso* and Socialist democratic strategy in retrospect**

With hindsight, it is of course undeniable that contemporary Italy and Modern Europe ultimately rejected the Revolutionary Socialism endorsed by Gramsci in the *Biennio Rosso*. Insofar as Socialism exists at all today, it is the Reformist democratic strategy of Treves that has proved more enduring. Thus, a rejection of popular violence, commitment to the rule of law, parliamentary democracy (with its rights and freedoms) and Western electoral politics conducted predominantly by pragmatic elites pursuing gradual reform is manifestly the *modus operandi* of Socialist and Social Democratic parties today. Indeed, it is arguable that Gramsci himself in his more mature writings in the *Prison Notebooks* conceded some ground to the strategy championed by Treves and Reformists in the *Biennio Rosso*. For though he did not endorse the

substantive Social Democratic vision of a parliamentary road to Socialism (Femia 1981, 190-216) and he continued to lambast Reformism (Gramsci 1971, 223-226), some of the positions he defended in the *Notebooks* clearly resonate with Treves's ideas and Reformism more generally.

Gramsci thus maintained in his prison writings that different approaches were required for East and West as Reformists like Treves had long argued, advocating a distinctive Socialist strategy in Western states that privileged a gradual long-term ideological campaign for mass consent in civil society (a 'war of position'). Indeed, in a further tilt towards Treves, he contrasted this strategy of 'hegemony' with that of the Bolsheviks in the East which was now depicted as heavily dependent on violence, coercion and a rapid 'frontal attack' (or 'war of maneuver') on the state (Gramsci 1971, 229-239). Moreover, in prison he endorsed an 'integral' Socialist strategy which was conceived not solely in terms of soviets, but as the development of an expansive hegemonic apparatus of mass institutional support and participation across the spheres of the economy, politics and especially civil society with the aim of creating an 'integral state' (Gramsci 1971, 9, 15-16, 239, 267). The echoes of Treves's 'integral Socialism' are unmistakable here – albeit configured again in a distinctive Gramscian manner. Finally, Gramsci argued in the *Prison Notebooks* for the necessity of strategic compromises with other social forces (1971, 161) and especially the previously excoriated petit bourgeoisie and their intellectual strata. For he now recognized that intellectuals were vital intermediary linchpins in influencing and mobilizing the masses (Gramsci 1971, 12-13). Indeed, Gramsci even castigated 'intransigents' such as Bordiga in his prison writings for a fear of compromise (1971, 167-168); a criticism that might equally have been applied to his own *Biennio Rosso* writings.

It is of course important not to overstate these concessions to Social Democracy or to present them as wholesale appropriations of Kautsky's or Bernstein's positions (Thomas, 2009: 78-80, 161-167). It is a mistake too to explain them solely in terms of a conversion to a brand of 'Western Marxism' since many of these moves were prefigured to some extent by the Comintern's brief but vitally important United Front period that followed the *Biennio Rosso* in the early to mid-1920s (McNally 2011, 2015). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc it is in any case difficult to imagine even the revised Revolutionary Socialism of the *Prison Notebooks* meeting much success in the West today given the virtual disappearance of Communist parties there. This does not however mean that Gramsci's vision of Socialism and democracy developed in the *Biennio Rosso* have nothing to offer. Indeed, it is arguable that some of his ideas were ahead of their time, and aspects of his approach to democracy and the masses are actually becoming increasingly important in contemporary debates on Socialist strategy.

For it is now widely acknowledged that European Social Democracy – with the decline of party and trade union membership and the increasingly professionalized bureaucratic organizational structures of its parties - is confronted with a long-term crisis of legitimacy that is above all marked by its present failure to develop a strategy capable of mobilizing sustained mass support in Western states (see, for example, Cramme and Diamond 2012; Keating and McCrone 2013). Ironically, the absence of a notable Communist opposition on the Left in the Post-Cold War era has further undermined the popular appeal of its now taken-for-granted principles of non-violence, the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, strategic compromise and piecemeal reform. Indeed, it has brought into sharper relief the elitist nature of its project (Cuperus 2003) and these weaknesses are of course being fully exploited by contemporary Left and Centre-Left populist

movements in the wake of the 2008 recession and the Eurozone crisis (particularly *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy, *Podemos* in Spain and *Syriza* in Greece). Thus, they effectively portray established Socialist and Social Democratic parties as part of a corrupt cosmopolitan political 'elite,' opposing the will of 'the people' (Mudde, 2016). Stock condemnations of populism that erroneously characterize it as necessarily a right-wing, illiberal and irrational phenomenon are unlikely to rescue Socialism from this current crisis (March 2007). In fact, it is arguable that this can only begin through retrieving the core *popular* spirit of democracy as an historical process of constituting and empowering 'the people' to challenge political and economic elites who of course have considerable interest in deriding the 'populist' logic of democracy as a 'dangerous' and 'regressive' phenomenon (Laclau 2005: 19). It was this popular orientation to democracy that pervaded the thought of Antonio Gramsci in the *Biennio Rosso* and was extended and elaborated in his *Prison Notebooks* under the concepts of 'hegemony,' 'civil society,' and most importantly, 'the national-popular' (see, McNally 2009). Pursuing it will however require Socialism to develop a new and reinvigorated popular organization structure that engages and captures contemporary civil society and the masses in a manner which Left populist movements have failed so far to achieve. This is the formidable Gramscian challenge that Socialist and Social Democratic parties are confronted with today if they are truly to become credible and effective democratic movements capable of producing radical political and economic reform. Viewed from this perspective, one might argue then in conclusion that the legacies and lessons of Italy's *Biennio Rosso* span the Reformist and Revolutionary divide and still speak to debates on contemporary Socialist and democratic politics in Italy and further afield nearly a century later.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to staff at the *Fondazione Istituto Gramsci* in Rome for their assistance in carrying out the research for this article. I would also like to acknowledge the helpful comments of anonymous reviewers to this journal and the participants of a ‘Democracy and Capitalism’ workshop at the *Manchester Workshops in Political Theory* (2013) where a first version of this paper was delivered.

## Funding

The research for this article was partially funded by The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.

*This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Modern Italian Studies on 21 June 2017, available online:*

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1354571X.2017.1321932>

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<sup>1</sup> While Turati was official editor of *Critica Sociale* from its foundation to its initial dissolution (1891-1926), it is clear that Treves played the predominant role at the journal in the *Biennio Rosso* period, writing the large majority of the leading editorial articles in its opening section ‘Politica ed Attualità.’ In fact, Treves’s wider contribution to Socialism and Reformism in Italy – as editor of *Il Grido del Popolo* (1896-98), *Il Tempo* (1902-10) *Avanti* (1910-12) and the new PSU’s *La Giustizia* (1922-25) – has been somewhat overshadowed by the focus on Turati in the literature.

<sup>2</sup> It was during the initial suppression of Italian Socialism under Francesco Crispi and his allies in the 1890s that Treves served a short prison term (two months) and was forced into exile to avoid further imprisonment (1894-98). On his return to Italy he was first elected to the Italian Parliament as a PSI Deputy (1906-1924) and then a PSU Deputy (1924-26) after the split. He was again forced to flee Italy in the wave of Fascist reaction that led to Gramsci’s



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incarceration in November 1926. In exile in France he was a leading figure in the *Concentrazione Anti-fascista Italiana* up until his death in Paris in 1933 (see Casali 1985, 7-129).

<sup>3</sup> The available English-language editions of Gramsci's *L'Ordine Nuovo* writings are employed here throughout. Full references to the original Italian version of the articles in *L'Ordine Nuovo* are however also included in the References list as they were consulted for contextual purposes. Where no English-language version of these writings or those in *Critica Sociale* were available references are to the original with my own translations.

<sup>4</sup> The prominent Reformists, Leonida Bissolati and Ivanoe Bonomi, were however expelled from the PSI for providing qualified support for the Libyan War. This weakening of the Reformist wing facilitated the Maximalist takeover of the Party (De Grand 1989, 24-25; Levy 1993, 22).

<sup>5</sup> According to Di Scala the pseudonym "La Critica Sociale" is Turati's (1980, 13).

<sup>6</sup> The speech was reprinted in *Critica Sociale* in September 1920.

<sup>7</sup> The translation here is Joseph Butigieg's (cited in Gramsci 1996, 443).

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